The President

"Mr. Nixon's animosities grew in direct proportion to his political success—even after his record 1972 landslide."

Pat 8/9/74

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

'A Deep-Seated Hostility'

The malignancy that finally destroyed the presidency of Richard M. Nixon was exposed at its very outset following the 1968 election when the President-elect established temporary headquarters at Manhattan's Pierre Hotel.

One Republican politician newly enlisted on Mr. Nixon's staff was surprised in his first close-up observation of the new President by a uniquely unpresidential aspect of his discourse: the intensity with which Mr. Nixon attacked his "enemies"—particularly liberal Republicans and the press. Far more than mere advocacy of primitive conservatism, this aide felt, Mr. Nixon was displaying genuine, deep-seated hostility.

Those resentments smoldered and grew over the long hard political road that Mr. Nixon traveled to the White House where they were fed by his new struggles against Congress and the despised press. Instead of declining under the actuality of presidential power, Mr. Nixon's animus grew in direct proportion to his political success—even after his record 1972 landslide. From those animosities came the abuse of power and the lawlessness that destroyed him.

This self-destructive inner passion might seem to conflict with the portrait of Mr. Nixon painted by the secret White House tape recordings as the supreme public relations practitioner, preoccupied with scenarios, images and gamesmanship.

The tapes do reveal incessant discussion of public relations unrelieved by issues or serious ideological considerations. One longtime Nixon associate, a top presidential aide in the early Nixon days, puts it this way: Most Presidents stick to the business of government for their first three years, then campaign for re-election in the fourth year; Mr. Nixon governed for six months at most, then turned his whole attention to re-election for the next 3½ years.

Nevertheless, Mr. Nixon was never truly a political pragmatist, seeking only a majority. Far from it. His gamesmanship was heated out of proportion by the fires of hostility to his enlarging circle of "enemies." This exotic mixture of public relations and hate is pointed up by the fateful transcript of his June 23, 1972, conversation with H. R. Haldeman.

That transcript will have its place in history as the "smoking gun" of the Watergate conspiracy. But parts of the transcript, though irrelevant to Watergate, betray the underlying cause of the Nixon presidency's ruin.

Mr. Nixon's lack of interest in issues is stripped bare. When Haldeman informed the President about British devaluation of the pound, Mr. Nixon replies: "I don't care about it. Nothing we can do about it." Although federal revenue sharing has been heralded as his greatest domestic accomplishment, Mr. Nixon tells Haldeman: "There ain't a vote in it . . . there's no votes in it, Bob."

But the transcript shows that the President was no super-pragmatist interested only in votes. About to launch the most successful Republican courtship of the Jewish vote in history, Mr. Nixon is concerned about daughter Julie's visit to a Jacksonville, Fla. museum because: "The arts you know—they're Jews, they're left wing—in other words stay away."

While his aides were ardently wooing rank-and-file and leadership support in organized labor, Mr. Nixon was preoccupied that daughter Tricia had been greeted at an Allentown, Pa., speech by "20 or 30 thugs—labor thugs out booing"—referring later to the "Allentown Bullies Club."

Aides who fed Mr. Nixon's passion against his enemies, such as Haldeman, prospered. Those who did not were sneered at behind their backs. Faithful servitor Herbert Klein is condemned by Mr. Nixon for being "unorganized," but his real sin was lack of hate. "He's just not our guy at all is he?" asks the President. "No," replies Haldeman.

Whatever credits history gives Richard Nixon will be measured by his actual personal contribution to foreign policy initiatives—China, Russia and ending the Vietnam war. But former Nixon lieutenants now say he never did really understand what Vietnamization was all about, dismissing it just as he did devaluation of the pound or revenue sharing. Certainly he cared far less about Vietnamization than about his raging hostility to "enemies."

In a 1971 book about the Nixon presidency, we called him "a man with an infinite capacity for keeping a permanent mental ledger of the ills done him over the years." By keeping that ledger up to date—and taking positive action to redress its balance—Richard M. Nixon destroyed his presidency and brought his country to the brink of chaos.

© 1974, Field Enterprises, Inc.